

# ORIGIN OF RELIGIONS & A BRIEF GLANCE AT HINDUISM, ISLAM, & BUDDHISM

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# The Significance of the Study of Major Religions

The study of major religions of the world does help me to become both a better human being and a better follower of my own faith.

After studying briefly the various major religions of the world, I could realize the universality of this quest for meaning and the eternal, despite of the many scientific developments. The further development of religions is an indication that even though we have developed materially we still are in need to develop spiritually. The dissatisfaction inside and search for fulfillment is well reflected in the way the various religions are followed. The realization of this human condition spurs me even more on the search for the truth. Even as a Christian I realize that there are still many questions that are left unanswered. This, probably, helps me to be more spiritually oriented and thus be a better human being. It is amazing to find how great a role worship and belief play in a religion. Faith in a God is indispensable to life. Tolstoy said that it was faith that gave him meaning in life. Perhaps, this understanding of the significance of faith could only be realized after studying the pathos of people of other religions.

I believe that if every individual man and woman studied the major religions with an open mind they would grow to learn to respect each other and relate to each other in ways that are more efficient. This would surely help them to be better humans. I think that instead of remaining in my own well and desiring to limit everything to and bringing everything in to it, one must get out of that well, survey the whole expanse of human spiritual experience. This would surely help him to be more sympathetic to his fellow humans. I am not encouraging here compromise. I only am emphasizing the need of a knowledge of other religions for an understanding of the human quest for spirituality, the human quest for salvation, and what that means to me as a human myself.

A study of the major religions also helps me to become a better follower of my own faith. By studying the major religions, I sense the need of studying my own religion more deeply. This, in order that I may find myself in a sure ground when proclaiming to other people that my faith is the truth. To say that I know the truth does seem to be ambitious and to say that I do not know the truth seems to be humble enough to many in this post-modern world, which follows the rule that absolute truth cannot be known. But one who has tasted and proved the truth must equip himself must also be ready to prove and confirm the truthfulness of his testimony. That is what makes a witness a witness. This forces me to study my faith more deeply.

## Significance of the Study of Major Religions

After observing the plurality of religions, I am also forced to be committed to the truth that I know and follow it more diligently. I understand that if I didn't do so I would not be able to proclaim to these searchers of truth the truth that I know. Unless I believe and practice my faith how can I preach it? The study of religions does challenge me to be more careful in my conversations with, behavior before, and relations with the people of other religions.

Therefore, study of major religions is very significant, especially to one undergoing ministerial training.

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The subject of the origin of religions is not free from debate. Perspectives differ along presuppositions. Even the scientific versions are not beyond dispute. Novel discoveries are forcing us to re-examine these scientific theories of religion that were considered to be axiomatic.

Much of the problem involved in the study of pre-literary religions arises because of the lack of sufficient historical information dating back to the time when religion began. What all we have that can give actual information dates from the literary period (c. 3000 BC) — the time when the great civilizations were rising and priesthood was being developed with the building of temples, idols, altars, and scriptures.

Archaeological findings dating to the time before the literary period do give some idea, but the interpretations cannot be considered conclusive, since they lack absolute evidence – i.e., evidence that proves the interpretations as being beyond doubt. A stone 'altar' might not have really been an altar after all. Though the various religious scriptures give some idea of the kind of religion practiced by their respective adherents, each of them differ in at least some way from each other in their descriptions of the origin of religion.<sup>1</sup>

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Robert Brow cannot be considered wrong when he answers the question "What was the first religion of man?" with the statement: "Answers to this question differ widely and depend very much on what view is taken of man's origin."<sup>2</sup> A polytheistic view, for instance, would opt for a polytheistic approach to religious history. An evolutionist would view religion as an evolved or evolving system.

The disagreement among the accounts intensifies the problem even more. Formerly, most would have chosen to cling fundamentally to their own religious tradition; but with the advent of Darwinism and the new ideological shift it provided, the intellectual climate was challenged. Darwin's naturalistic evolutionism provided a newer perspective and way of approach. Herbert Spencer applied the idea of evolution not just to biology but also to psychology, sociology, religion, and ethics. Thus the evolutionary process of religion was charted as from animism to polytheism to monotheism, pantheism, and monism.

The evolutionist viewpoint begins with the view that man evolved from a pre-simian ancestor. And so, since animals have no religion, a long period of apish chatter and fear of the unknown marked the trail towards the first religion "animatism". "Animatism," a "belief in a vague, potent, terrifying inscrutable force"<sup>3</sup> preceded "animism," the spirit-fearing religion of tribals. Out of animism arose polytheism, when the nature-spirits began to be attributed with personality—intellect,

emotions, and volition. Evolutionists believe that a certain form of polytheism divided the many gods hierarchically: one god was exalted above all the other gods in some way. Then each tribe began giving allegiance to a particular tribal god until monotheism was formed. Some philosophers (especially in India) began so deep an inward search that they ended up in abstractions concluding that Truth was beyond the domain of senses and could only be realized through self-abnegation. Pantheism and monism arose as a result.

The scientific garb worn by evolutionism greatly attracted and influenced scholars of most disciplines. It appeared to be proved, factual, and correct. In the west, the struggle to resolve the conflict between science and religion was tentatively solved by Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis, which attempted to interpret the Pentateuch to fit in with the evolutionary theory of history. Wellhausen's theory has now, however, been discredited and discarded by most scholars.

The archaeological findings and writings of early historical period give evidence of a monotheistic religion with priestly practices. Wilhelm Schmidt of Vienna and anthropologists led by him have shown that hundreds of tribes around the world do not follow animism as their original religion. But most of them have a faint picture of a 'high-god,' a benign father-creator-god, who seems to be almost forgotten, so transcendent and

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so alienated that he is no longer feared. In place of him have come spirits that are dreaded and sought to appease. In other words, animism was not preceded by animatism, but it was preceded by monotheism. Religion has not evolved; it had degraded.

The hypothesis of evolution is also not beyond controversy. It has both scientific and rational as well as historical problems involved in it. That is one of the reasons why we can contend that the biblical answer is not to be so easily dismissed as outdated. It has already been shown how anthropological researches have indicated that monotheism may be more naturally primitive as a world-view than animism. Thus, it is arbitrary to just state that religion has evolved, without considerations for other viewpoints and evidences.

The multiplication of evidence against the theory that religion originated in the fear of the dark unknown, feeling of dependence, and apish chatter and evolved into animism, polytheism, and consequentially, monotheism and monism; and the growing evidence in support of religion as having first started as monotheism and later degraded to polytheism, animism, and pantheism forces us to reconsider the biblical vantage point.

Turning to the biblical viewpoint, we see that God created the first man in His own image and likeness – i.e., as a rational, moral, volitional, and spiritual being – and began to have fellowship with him. Thus began the first religion as a relationship between God and man.



The fall of man in disobedience to God's commandment brought in the element of sacrifice. Later, descendents of Adam began to depart from the original concept of God, and the more they departed away the more distorted their conception of God, of human life, and human responsibility became. After the confusion of languages at Babel, people became divided rapidly into nations by languages and families (Gen.10: 5). Paul's theological interpretation of this historical event was that God *"made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the earth, and determined the times before appointed, and bounds of their habitations; that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him."* (Acts 17: 26,27). This division of clans and communities prevented faster spread of religious degeneration as it had, earlier to the flood. Religious degeneration was also checked by the destruction of the tribe or ethnic group that degenerated in its morality. This is a well-witnessed fact of history. Immorality weakens a tribe to such an extent that it falls prey to invading tribes, thus bringing disaster on itself.

Signs of a system of sacrifice in pre-literary religion seem to be almost every where. But a clear interpretation of their purpose is not very easy. Only data dating from the literary period is of substantial help. Prehistory gives proof for none of the theories. That is to say, what may be considered as proof for one theory of religious history can also be interpreted as

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proof for an other. In addition, how do we even know that the objects had religious significance in the first place? And so whatever evidence we have dates from the time when religion had come a long way from its first and original state. By the time religion began, it had already developed a system of priesthood, place of worship, etc. therefore, since we can obtain no absolute proof for even our hypothesis of the origin of religion, we may, on recourse to reason opt for the biblical account as our starting point. Monotheism explains several historical facts that are intractable on the evolution of religion hypothesis.<sup>4</sup>

Traces of the sacrificial system can be found in ancient religion. Sacrifice was a means of approaching God or gods. The nomadic Aryan tribes who invaded the Indus and Ganges plains brought along with them to India the practice of sacrifice. After their settlement in India they developed a regular priesthood, and the *Vedas* were born during this period. The *Vedas* are hymns chanted during the sacrifice. The hymns address God as 'the sun,' 'the heavenly one,' 'the storm.' And no matter whatever name was given to God, He was worshipped as the supreme ruler of the universe. This practice is referred to as henotheism. Later, henotheism changed into polytheism when the various names were personified to form various gods. And so, by 1000 BC, it is understood that the *Vedic* religion had become polytheistic; whereas, in its earliest forms it has an appearance of being monotheistic.

Attention may be focussed at the origin of the various names of God while discussing the origin of religions. The Creator-God has been called by various names in different nations. At first he was referred to as *Dyaus Pitar* ('divine father') which is the same as the Greek *Zeus Pater*, the Latin *Jupiter* or *Deus*, the early German *Tiu* or *Ziu*, and Norse *Tyr*. He was also known as 'the heavenly one' (Sanskrit *Varuna*, Greek *Ouranos*), or 'the friend' (Sanskrit *mitra*, Persian *mithra*). He was also, later, referred to as 'the fire' (Sanskrit *agni*, Latin *ignis*, Greek *hagnos*) which was crucial to the sacrificial event.

As time went by, stories and myths increased in these religions. Polytheism went rampant and deities were identified in the forms of terrestrial creatures. Sex was added to worship in the fertility cult with a host of superstitious beliefs. Monotheism having degenerated into polytheism, the religious situation got worse and worse until, finally, monotheism became almost untraceable.<sup>5</sup> However, monotheism didn't totally vanish from the face of the earth. Some groups still worshipped the one true God.

Priests had become significant to religion because of the mediatory role they played between God and man. Ancient India, China, Egypt, classical Greece, Rome, and many other civilizations found priesthood emerging in their religions. The priests performed the religious rites, ceremonies, and sacrifices. Later, this priesthood degenerated into priestcraft with all its malicious and

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rapacious depravedness. Rituals increased with time and apparent need. Writings, hymns, collections, etc., came into being. Thus originated religion, which still keeps going on.

We can summarize the account of the origin of religion by stating that it began, as far as it seems reasonable to assume, with the creation of man and his first understanding of God as the Almighty Creator God. This form of pure monotheism, however, began degenerating by the impact of sin into polytheism and other forms that expressed separation from God.

## **The Concept of God, Nature, Fear, and Salvation in Pre-Literary Religions**

As to what the pre-literary-era man conceived of God is also open to discussion as has already been seen. The evolutionist would say that God was once conceived of as the dark unknown, then as forces of nature, then as spirits, gods, and lately – towards the beginning of literature-- as the transcendent God. But the biblical perspective suggests something very different. Anyway, resorting to archaeological findings becomes necessary once information regarding pre-literary religion is sought.

The interpretation of archaeological findings is not so easy. Pre-literary and pre-history are synonymous since pre-historic period refers to the period before recorded

history. The period of interpretation of pre-historic materials is the difficulty one faces when ascertaining whether an object was used for religious purposes or for something else. Pre-historic source materials include the following:<sup>6</sup>

1. Burial places and burial finds,
2. Deposition of offerings,
3. Representation of deities, spirits, and cultic figures (carved idols, reliefs, rock paintings, etc.),
4. Remains of constructions with religious associations, such as altars, temples, or foundations of world pillars.

The pre-historic period has been divided into

1. The Paleolithic – Old Stone Age. Historians consider the people of this period to be hunters, food-gatherers, and fishers.
2. The Neolithic – New Stone Age (c. 10,000 BC). During this period the hunters began turning into farmers.

Viewing from the monotheistic viewpoint, we may infer that the people of the Paleolithic period regarded God as the one who protected them and helped them in their hunting episodes. Following the monotheistic theory (that religion degenerated from monotheism to all of its other forms), we may assume that this God of

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the hunters became very significant only to the utilitarianistic purposes of later generations. That is to say, He was worshipped not for relationship but for benefit. For example, bear skulls found in Drachenloch cave in Switzerland seem to indicate that the dead bears' skulls were so buried in stone coffins because it was believed that the dead animal will return to life, or persuade its relatives to make themselves available to the hunter. If this plausible 'cultic interpretation' is true then it indicates not only how much the concept of God had fallen down but also how low the need of worship and its quality had come down.

From 30,000 – 10,000 BC spans the Upper Paleolithic Age. The way the bodies were buried during this period gives evidence of a clear belief in life after death. Also during this time the cult of the mother-goddess appeared. The idols have very distorted features with the breasts, hips, and sexual parts excessively enlarged. This emphasis on the private parts is a sure evidence of religion degenerating into a kind of naturalism – fertility cults. The concept of hunting magic might also have appeared during this period as is indicated by the cave paintings. If it was so the concept of a Transcendent, All-powerful, Sovereign God was delimited now to a power that could be tapped in by formulas.

It is certain that man was very fearful of natural forces that could be hazardous to his survival. And so he was

turning more and more to the mercy of nature, which he personified in many forms.

The Neolithic Period (from 10,000 BC) is the period during which objects of stones are not found as chipped but as grounded and polished. During this period, producing replaced hunting. Warm weather and fast melting ice characterize the climate. Farming and village life are established. Pottery, weaving, and agriculture come to scene. Dogs and goats are domesticated. Death and burial beliefs appear. Graves have been found with gifts in them; probably, indicating a certain kind of belief in life after death. Fertility rites also abound. Temples appear with altars, vases, etc., inside. The megalithic monuments, dolmens, and menhirs indicate that the priesthood had also indulged in astrology and magic. Superstitions and religious rituals might as well have begun to abound with further leanings towards magic, taboos, totems, and witchcraft. The interpretations are, however, only probabilities.

The temples became the places of sacrifice. Salvation-beliefs may be divided into salvation-present and salvation-future. Salvation-present was survival-oriented and was sought by appeasing gods and goddesses and also by nature worship. Salvation-future was for the peace of the soul after death. The family members buried their dead one with gifts that would give him/her comfort. There are a varied possibilities of interpretations, however.

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In short, pre-historic religion with its concept of God, fear, nature, salvation might be considered to be much superstitious and utilitarianistic arising from a fear of the natural forces and the instinct for survival. Anyway, we should not presume that our hypothesis is the final.



# HINDUISM

## The Four Goals of Life

The four goals of life according to Hinduism are *dharma* (righteousness), *artha* (worldly prosperity or material well being), *kama* (enjoyment or pleasure), and *moksha* (liberation).<sup>7</sup>

1. *Dharma*: *Dharma* is translated as righteousness, duty, law, and religion in English. In Hindu mythology, Rama, Yudhishtra, and Harishchandra are all symbols of *dharma* – ones who symbolized the dignity and power of *dharma* through their lives.

*Dharma* is a relative term – relative in the sense that it has sense only in its practical relation to each of the *varnas* and the *ashramas*. The edifice of law dealing with the *varnas* (i.e., caste divisions) is called the *varnasarama dharma*. The *varnasarama dharma*, however, must be distinguished from the practice of the modern caste system. The Hindus came about with the *varnasarama dharma* theory for the purpose of benefit to the society. *Dharma* is social and relational. A cooperative division of labor in society is imperative for its progress. Each individual must perform his duty (*dharma*) as prescribed by the law related to his *varna*. He must be faithful to his *dharma* for the benefit of society and his own self.

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The mythological basis for the *varnasarama dharma* theory is that Brahma, the Creator God, is the originator of the castes.<sup>8</sup> According to this mythical account, the *Brahmin* or the priestly caste came from the mouth of Brahma and so were the sole authority on deciphering and proclaiming the scriptures; the *Kshatriya* or the warrior group came from the arms of Brahma; the *Vaisyas* or merchants, from his thigh; and the *Sudras* or the workmen, from his foot. It is the *dharma* of the *Brahmin* not to eat non-vegetarian food. It is the *dharma* of the *Kshatriya* to protect his people from the enemies. That is the reason why when Arjun desired to back off from killing his cousins out of love and compassion, Krishna explained to him the meaning of life and *dharma* and encouraged him not to give in to his feelings but fulfil his *dharma* of being a *Kshatriya* by killing the enemies of righteousness, presently his brothers.

The modern world looks at the caste-system as the greatest evil, because of the inequality it presupposes and the evil it produces. It is a hindrance to the self-actualization a *Sudra*. Most scholars, however, agree that the caste system originated out of pure motives – aiming towards a well-organized and cooperative society. Caste system, according to them, becomes an evil when it is implemented as a means by the upper castes to dominate and suppress the lower castes.

The *ashrama dharma* divides a human life term into four stages. At each of the stages, an individual is expected to fulfil his particular *ashrama dharma* -- related to that particular stage – in order to attain *moksha* (salvation). This too is a responsibility-duty-oriented division, which we will later explore a little more.

The Hindu concept of *dharma* can well be interpreted to serve utilitarian purposes. In a recent TV programme entitled COURT MARSHALL on the SAB TV, when Karan Thapar questioned Dr. Praveen Togadia about the kind of subtle maneuvers they employed while contesting the elections in Gujarat, he replied by saying that if it was *dharma* for Sri Rama to kill Bali from a hiding place... then it is equally right for them to employ any means to accomplish their *dharmic* purposes.<sup>9</sup>

2. *Artha*: Hinduism is not a not-this-worldly religion altogether. It also emphasizes the importance of earthly prosperity. Progress by development occurs through the pursuit of worldly and material well being, and that in accordance to the rule of *dharma*. This is the material aspect of life. A man not only ought to pursue righteousness (*dharma*) but also pursue material prosperity (*artha*). Almost every Hindu aspiring to be rich worships the goddess Laxmi, the goddess of wealth. Various religious ways are sought by the Hindus

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to ward off an evil eye, to destroy a dangerous spell, and to tap the flow of riches.

3. *Kama*: Life's goal is also to satisfy the demands of the flesh. The enjoyment of *kama*, physical desire is not evil when it is pursued in accordance to the *dharma* in Hinduism. The erotic sculptures over the temples at Khajuraho and other places, the once prevalent practice of the *devadasi* system, and a host of other things bear witness to the religious encouragement of *kama*. It doesn't, however, mean that Hinduism promoted licentiousness, though some of its gods favored that. Hinduism does uphold the virtues of *Pativrata* (a wife's faithfulness and total allegiance to her husband) and *Tyaga* (renunciation of worldly desires). The pluralistic nature of Hinduism also allows a plurality of ethical ways, only they must be somehow disguised as a form of *dharma*.

4. *Moksha*: *Moksha* can be translated as 'liberation' or 'release.' It is the release, exit of the self from this world of existence and liberation from the series of birth and rebirths.<sup>10</sup> Release can be obtained at different levels. A householder who, for example, conducts well his household affairs gets into Swargaloka where gods live. A brahmacharya who performs well his dharma enters Maharloka. A vanaprasthi enters *Jnanaloka* and *Tapaloka* to enjoy higher pleasures. A righteous sanyasin enters Satyaloka. But the final part of salvation can only be obtained when an individual

merges with the Over-Soul Brahman in the final stage of realization. A person can achieve *moksha* by following three ways. We will examine each of them later.

The ideas behind the doctrine of *moksha* are *Samsara*, *Karma*, and *Punarjanma*. There is also the concept of *Maya* (illusion – subjective and objective) which is posited to explain each of these. *Samsara* is the universal manifestation,<sup>11</sup> the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The law of *Karma* states that each man receives the fruit of his actions in the next birth (*Punarjanma*). The cycle of rebirth goes on and on until *moksha* is attained. *Moksha* is the release from rebirth by union with the absolute. By breaking loose from these chains of *Maya* and *avidya* (ignorance) and merging with Brahman in absolute identity *moksha* is attained.

## **The Four Stages of Life**

Hinduism divides the life of man into four stages. They are as follows:

1. *Brahmacharya*. The bachelor-student life.
2. *Grihastya*. The householder life.
3. *Vanaprasthi*. The life of retirement to forest, i.e., the hermit life.

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### 4. *Sanyasin*. The holy sage, ascetic life.

The above four stages are known as the *ashram dharmas*. These were *dharmas* or duties assigned to each period of a man's life. While the first three stages are said to be obligatory, i.e., all men experience them, the last is only optional, and not all men reach it.<sup>12</sup> Each period or stage may be divided into 25 years each.

The first stage of *Brahmacharya* is of student life. This is the period of life when man lives in the house or *ashram* of the guru, his teacher and guide, and under his supervision studies the sacred texts. He also acquires expertise in various fields of learning at this stage.

The student must be obedient and submissive to his teacher, without which he can learn nothing. The guru to him is like God since he helps him to meet and know God. The respect for the guru and for the parents is to be continued to the end of one's life.

The *Grihastya* is the period when a man gets married and settles down to ordinary family life. It is known as the householder life. Living with his family and looking after them, the householder also contributes much to the society in which he lives. Continuation of the family line by reproduction is a significant part of this stage. All the *dharmas* pertaining to this stage contribute much to the wellbeing of the society, family, and

lineage. Virtues like honesty, responsibility, industry, and hospitality are obligatory during this period. The householder is not just a provider of his family needs but also a guide to his family. *Dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha* are highly pursued during this stage.

The *Vanaprastha* period, i.e., of hermit life, is the stage when a man retires to the forest with his wife and meditates on the value of life. Away from all pursuit of worldly materials, he can now concentrate on spending his time in meditating on the values of life and strive to know God. The observance of such a life is, it may be noted, highly impossible in the modern era. The *ashram dharmas* were solely enacted in accordance to the feasibility of circumstances during the Vedic and puranic era and could not have been envisaged for our times.

The final stage of life, which only some can reach, is that of the holy sage, the ascetic life called the *Sanyasa*. During this stage a man renounces all worldly attachments, immerses himself in his struggle to know the truth and experience union with it. The Sanyasin practices hard asceticism to overpower his flesh and his senses. The goal is to become so liberated from the domain of the senses and carnal passions so as to transcend them, realize God and attain *moksha*.

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All that are faithful in the observance of the various *varana* and *ashram dharmas* enter the various respective gradations of heaven.

### The Three Ways to Become One with God

Freedom from *Samsara*, the cycle of birth and death, is *moksha*. It implies union with Brahman – the only Absolute Reality. By this experience of Brahman, *avidya* (ignorance) is destroyed. By the power of *Maya* one is deceived into believing that the plurality of phenomenon is true. In his *avidya* he is chained to *samara*, the manifest world filled with the cycle of events, of birth, death, rebirth, etc. *Moksha* is the eternal, intrinsic nature of the *Atman* and is the chief goal of life. It can neither be produced, modified, attained, nor refined since it is an accomplished fact, the intrinsic nature of the *Atman* that needs to be discovered by intuition. Self-realization or realization of the *Atman* (Self) as the reality of the universe is *moksha*. The key is detachment from the phenomenal world and union with Absolute Reality.

Three ways have been prescribed by which one may attain perfection, or be liberated from the bondage of *Samsara*.<sup>13</sup> They are as follows:



1. The *Karma Yoga*, i.e., the path of work
2. The *Jnana Yoga*, i.e., the path of knowledge
3. The *Bhakti Yoga*, i.e., the path of devotion

The *Karma Yoga* is the practical method, the *Jnana Yoga* is the theoretical method, and the *Bhakti Yoga* is the emotional method.<sup>14</sup>

1. The *Karma Yoga*. This is the path of action. It essentially involves the working out of right principles in ones life so as to be liberated from the chains of *Samsara*. The bad *Karma* has its roots in selfishness and the desire for the fruit of action. The Bhagvad Gita states that action should be motivated by detachment from the desire of its fruit. Action is, indubitably, superior to inaction. Only action that is selfless is liberating.

“If one performs all actions including daily duties dispassionately, without anger, without attachment, in the spirit of selflessness, in dedication to God, without desire for the fruit, such action will free the individual soul and will lead him to perfection.”<sup>15</sup>

Such action alone constitutes sacrifice. Every single act must be a sacrifice (*Yagna*). *Sanyasa* is the renunciation of the desire and not the renunciation of action. *Tyaga* is the renunciation of the fruit of all

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works. *Karma* includes acts of sacrifices, gifts, austerity, *dharma*, etc. but true, liberating *Karma* is desireless.

2. The *Jnana Yoga*. It is the way of knowledge, not the kind of scientific or physical knowledge that the world pursues but a metaphysical, a mystical one. It is the knowledge of reality as it is by union with it. While the plurality of the universe as it appears to us does constitute our experience of self and the world, the Gita calls for consideration of the *Jnana Yoga*. It calls for union with the absolute non-dual Reality – the realization of self as Self. For this the mind must be disciplined and tuned in with Reality. The individual self is the hindrance when it phenomenalises as a separate entity from other entities. *Jnana* or knowledge happens when this self realizes that it is Brahman – Being – Reality; and that all the other phenomena is itself in manifestation. It is held that *Jnana Yoga* is difficult without *Karma Yoga*. Study of the Vedas and other scriptures is the action followed by long periods of reflection and meditation.

3. The *Bhakti Yoga*. This is the way of devotion, the way of trust and love. Devotion is interpreted as the bond of trust and love to a personal God.<sup>16</sup> Unlike *Jnana Yoga*, which focuses on the Impersonal Brahman, *Bhakti Yoga* focuses on a loving attachment to God, a longing for God for its own sake. To be noted is the concept of this God as being transcendent and yet totally immanent. All icons of this God are to be

considered as symbolical. Absolute meditation and undivided devotion to Ishwara is essential to *Bhakti*. God must become his/her sole refuge. For those who have found *Karma Yoga* and *Jnana Yoga* extremely difficult, the *Bhakti marga* comes in as solace.

A true devotee has three distinctive qualities: evenmindedness, undivided devotion, and skill in action. These three qualities woven together in perfect harmony within the devotee knit him/her to his/her Lord. By absolute devotion, one is united to his/her Lord in love. Stories abound of how Vishnu finds the marks of the beating inflicted on his devotee's body on his own. The Lord is so tied to his devotee that in one story he forgets to bring his *chakra* along with him when he hurries to rescue his devotee from peril.

Thus, by following any of the above three ways a person can find his/her way to God.

## **Parallels in Christianity**

*The Four Goals:* Christianity also talks of righteousness, material prosperity, enjoyment of life, and salvation (Matt. 6: 23; Ps. 1; Eph. 6:3; Ps.104: 14;

Jn. 3: 16), but it has no division of class or caste within it. It neither does set rules for *ashrama dharmas*. The

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*moksha* of Christianity is *moksha* from sin, its condemnation, and its misery. Hinduism talks of liberation from the misery of the world. But then it delimits that misery as being an illusion of the self and reduces it to a picture of recurring birth. The difference centers on the diagnosis of the human problem. It also consists on how the solution is formulated. "Why is a man here" (the goal of human existence) is tied to "Where did man come from" and "Where is he going?" What a person believes about his origin and his destiny (past and future) affects his decision (present) greatly. Christianity does differ greatly from Hinduism in the explanation of all these three questions, although it resembles superficially to it in its acknowledgement of the belief on creation and judgement.

*The Four Stages of Life:* Although Christianity doesn't subscribe to the theory of *ashram dharma*, it does uphold the virtues of social responsibility, duty, protection of family, respect of parents and elders, detachment from carnal lusts, sacrificial giving, etc. One is required to fulfill his duty according to his position. There is a time for everything.

*The Three Ways:* Christianity, especially in its Protestant form, emphasizes the fact and is built on the assumption that man can never be reconciled to his God by his own works. Man is intrinsically sin-proned, lustful, and proud. That is why, we have the concepts of Grace, Sacrifice, and Atonement on which

Christianity stands. But a Christian is saved unto good works (Eph. 2: 10).

Christianity does talk about spiritual knowledge, but it is the practical knowledge of knowing God as ones Lord and accepting Jesus as ones Lord and Savior (Jn. 3:16). The world is not an illusion. It is real – created by God. The self is not God. But man is created in the image of God and the Christian is expected to grow up in the image of Christ the Son of God. In this way, the *Karma marga* doesn't is a failure according to Christianity. *Jnana* can be reinterpreted as knowledge of God, not intellectual but personal and relational. It is not *Jnana* of one being God himself but *Jnana* of God as ones God.

Christianity finds great parallels in *Bhakti Yoga*. Devotion is sublime to Christianity. "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind," is said to be the greatest of the commandments. Loving God and obeying his commandments (*Bhakti* and *Karma*) go together. Christian *Bhakti*, however, is anti-idolatry. Idolatry is considered an affront on the dignity of God. The devotional hymns of popular Hinduism are much parallel to Christian worship. The only basic differentiating element is the cross of Jesus Christ, which also segregates Christianity from any other religion of the world.

# ISLAM

## **The Teachings of Islam**

The teachings of Islam resemble much the teachings of Judaism and Christianity. Authoritatively originating from Mohammed's acclaimed revelations, they stood in stark contrast to the prevailing beliefs of the people of his own time. The people of Arabia were superstitious, polytheistic, and idolaters. Their lives were steeped in blind beliefs, immorality, blood-drenched wars, and purposeless living. In the midst of such chaos, Mohammed arose as a prophet of the One God to lead his people back to their God. The word "Islam" means "to surrender or to submit oneself for obedience to God."<sup>17</sup> A Muslim is one "who surrenders himself to obey God." The name Islam is received from the Koran itself:

"This day have I perfected your religion for you and completed My favour unto you, and have chosen for you as religion AL-ISLAM."<sup>18</sup>

Mohammed tried to return his people back to God in accordance to and by the revelation, he received; they are recorded in the Holy Koran. All who chose to receive and abide by these teachings of Islam became a Muslim. Following are the teachings of Islam on God, universe, human beings, angels, Koran, and the Law:

**1. God.** The Muslims refer to God as *Allah*. Allah means 'the one and only God.'<sup>19</sup> Three things about Allah are noticeable.

a. *The Uniqueness of Allah:* The uniqueness of God is fundamental to the faith of Islam. Any variance from this standing is considered infidelity. This also reflects in Islam's rejection of the Christian doctrine of Trinity. God can't be three; He is One. This is not non-dualism. While non-dualism holds that all existences are only one existence appearing to be plural but essentially non-dual, Islamic monotheism holds that the world is surely pluralistic, God being transcendent and beyond the universe. There is nothing in this universe to match or compare with Him. Allah is the one God, the Creator of the universe. There is not and cannot be anyone equal to Him.

b. *The Attributes of Allah:* To know what God is like would have been very impossible if the Koran had not revealed it. This is so because there is none like Allah in the whole world. Following are some things about Allah that we can know from the Koran:

1. Allah is eternal. He is beyond time.
2. Allah is omniscient. Nothing, past, present, and future is hidden from Him.
3. Allah is omnipotent.
4. Allah's will is supreme. Nothing can happen without His will.

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5. Allah hears all sounds; yet, He doesn't have an ear like men.
6. Allah sees all things; yet, He doesn't have an eye like men.
7. Allah communicates with men.

c. *Names that Reveal His Nature:* The Koran mentions various names of Allah. Following are few of them:<sup>20</sup>

1. The One, the Real, the Living, the Secure, the First, the Last.
2. The Wise, the Knower, the One who comprehends (everything).
3. The Great, the Powerful, the Strong, the Mighty.
4. The Agent, the Beginner, the Creator, the King, the Sovereign, the Governor.
5. The Hearer, the Answerer (of prayer).
6. The Watcher, the See-er.
7. The Giver, the Merciful, the Compassionate, the Forgiver, the Generous, the Loving.

**2. The Universe.** Islam teaches that the universe is made up of both visible and invisible entities. Heaven and hell are also part of God's universe, His creation. Angels and *zins* are all part of the creature world. So is *Iblis* the devil and his angels. Heaven is a place of cool gardens, rivers, and fruit trees. It is the place where



the believers will rest forever. Hell is the place where the wicked and the unbelievers will go to suffer forever. It has been divided into various compartments, each reserved for its kind of the condemned.

**3. Human beings.** The Koran states that Allah created humans out of dust, then from a little fluid.

“Allah created you from dust, then from a little fluid, then He made you pairs (the male and female).”<sup>21</sup>

The life of a human is conditioned by God’s sovereign will. Nothing happens to him without Allah’s approval.

“No female beareth or bringeth forth save with His knowledge. and no one groweth old who groweth old, nor is aught lessened of his life, but it is recorded in a Book.”<sup>22</sup>

God appointed humans as His agents to rule on earth. And so humans are servants of Allah. The greatest honor a man can have on this earth is to be called ‘a servant of God.’ The fall of humans resulted from the disobedience of Adam who chose to listen to Satan instead of listening to Allah. Allah guides whom He wills unto a straight path.<sup>23</sup>

**4. Angels.** Angels one of the means by which Allah communicates with and guides men. These unseen companions of men work as envoys of God. One of the most important of them is Gabriel who brought the Koran to Mohammed.

## Islam

**5. Koran.** The Muslims believe that the whole Koran is a copy of the Heavenly Book written before the world began. It is in the Arabic language; an exact translation of it is considered impossible. The Koran was revealed to Mohammed in portions over a time span of over twenty years. The Koran has been divided into 114 Surahs, all of which had been recorded before the Prophet's death. In the Caliphate of Othman, all existing copies of the Holy Koran were called in and an authoritative version, based on Abu Bakr's collection and the testimony of those who had committed the whole Koran to memory, was compiled. This version preserved in its original form till now is considered the true copy of the Heavenly Book. The Muslims treat the Koran with much veneration. They cannot tolerate any dishonor of it. They will not touch it with dirty hands and will neither hold it in hand below the loins. The Sikhs got their way of venerating the Guru Granth Sahib from the Muslims.

**6. The Law.** The Law of Islam is referred to as the *shari'a*. This Arabic term means 'the road to the watering-place'.<sup>24</sup> The Shari'a is the road of right conduct following which a person can keep himself in submission to Allah. However, every Muslim understands that conformation to this Law, especially in this age, is not totally possible. Even interpretations of it differ. Seeing the difficulties associated with it, Islamic rulers and people resorted to various means of diluting and substituting the Shari'a with local customs and other feasible norms. Following are the two forms

of law, in addition to the Shari'a, that guide the lives of Muslims:

1. *Customary Laws:* Local customs and the Shari'a are intermixed to form customary laws. The African Muslims, for example, have retained their African customs along with the Shari'a.
2. *The Civil and Criminal Laws of Government:* The Shari'a was meant to regulate the lives of people of a very different time and place. Therefore, it cannot be wholly applied to a different time and situation. Muslim rulers, having sensed this difficulty, have come up with their own laws of trade and civil administration. Most Islamic countries have adopted a law code that is often based on European law. Nevertheless, the Shari'a is the law that is a reflection ideal living to every Muslim, being endorsed by the Koran itself.

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### **The Five Pillars of Islam and Their Practice by Muslims**

The five Pillars of Islam are:

1. Declaration of the Islamic Creed: the *Shahada*.
2. The Prayer-act: the *Salat*.
3. Almsgiving: the *Zakat*.
4. The Fast during the month of Ramadan: the *Sawm*.
5. Pilgrimage to Mecca: the *Hajj*.

The above are mandated by the Shari'a to every Muslim. They are what makes up Islamic service, or worship, *'ibadat*.

1. *Declaration of the Islamic Creed, the Shahada*. The creed is a declaration in the form, "I testify that there is no god except Allah, and that Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah." The sincere confession of this creed makes a person a Muslim. The creed affirms the central belief of Islam that God is one, Mohammed is the final and supreme prophet of God, and he has established the brotherhood of all believers.

2. *The Prayer-act, the Salat*: Muslims are required to perform the *Salat* five times a day: at dawn, before sunrise; soon after mid-day; during the afternoon; soon after sunset; before retiring to bed. In addition to the

time, a Muslim must also observe the regulation regarding the posture: stand facing towards Mecca in a fixed position, prostration with forehead on the ground. This should be done only after having undergone the required ablutions. Various prayer verses are uttered during the prayer act. The prayer is not a mere personal prayer but a requirement of the law. The prayer-act must conform to the form prescribed by the law.

The prayer-act in the Mosque is done under the leadership of the leader called the *imam*. Friday noon is the prescribed time for congregational prayers.

3. *Alms giving, the Zakat*: The *Zakat* refers to the giving of contributions to the poor and the payment of tribute of the crops, products, income, etc. generosity and charity are encouraged by Islam. The *Zakat* money usually goes for the aid of the poor, the needy, and the travelers.

4. *Fasting, the Sawm*: The Koran's command regarding the observance of the fast is as follows:

"O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, even as it was prescribed for those before you, that ye may ward off (evil). (Fast) a certain number of days; and (for) him who is sick among you, or on a journey, (the same) number of other days; and for those of who can

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afford it there is a ransom; the feeding of a man in need – But whoso doeth good of his own accord, it is better for him: and that ye fast is better for you if ye did but know – The month of Ramadan in which was revealed the Qur'an, a guidance for mankind, and clear proofs of guidance, and the Criterion (of right and wrong). And whosoever of you is present, let him fast the month, and whosoever of you is sick or on a journey, (let him fast the same) number of days. Allah desireth for you ease; He desireth nor hardship for you; and (He desireth) that ye should complete the period, and that ye should magnify Allah for having guided you, and that peradventure ye may be thankful."<sup>25</sup>

This fast is observed very strictly during the day, to the extent that a Muslim is not meant to even swallow his spit during the day. Feasting, however, goes on till late in the night. During the day a Muslim is required to keep away from all food and drink, from tobacco, use of perfume, sexual intercourse, and evil speaking.

5. *The Pilgrimage, the Hajj*: The fifth obligation or Pillar of Islam is pilgrimage to the holy places. The prescribed time for the *Hajj* is the month of *dhu-al-Hijrah*. The primary place of pilgrimage is Mecca. Pilgrims, having gone through the required ablutions, put on a special

garment, and proceed towards the sacred area in Mecca under the guidance of specially appointed *mullahs* (priests). They then circle the *Kaaba* seven times kissing it once on each round. This Black Stone (i.e. the *Kaaba*) is said to have descended from the paradise of God, and will, on the last day, witness in favor of all those who had kissed it. Other spots of pilgrimage include the valley of *Mina* and Mount *Arafat*. The person who returns having completed his Hajj receives the title *Haji*, and obtains a very honored position in Muslim society.<sup>26</sup>

The festival of '*Id al-Adha*, which begins on the tenth day of the Month of Pilgrimage, is an opportunity of the whole Muslim community to share a little in the pilgrimage. '*Id al-Adha* means 'The Festival of Sacrifice.'

In addition to the above five obligations, a Muslim is also required to fulfill one other duty known as the *Jihad*. In recent times, this term has often been quoted as a controversial element of Islam, often in association with the terroristic activities carried on by Islamic fundamentalists and militants. The term originally means 'holy war' and refers to the duty obligatory on every Muslim 'to strive to bring the whole world under the banner of Islam, if necessary, by war against the non-Muslim world.'<sup>27</sup> It is the duty of spreading Islam and thus, get the whole world to surrender to Allah, which is the only way to world peace. Though not one of the five Pillars, *Jihad* seems to have been given the

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same importance as the five of them. This element of Islamic religious duty has given rise to much religious intolerance and community tension, especially in India. Perhaps Islam has been rightly referred to as a state building religion.



# BUDDHISM

## **The Life of Gautama Buddha**

Gautama Buddha was born as Siddhartha Gautama in c. 560 BC in a grove called Lumbini near the city of Kapilavastu (modern Bhinla), Nepal. His father's name was Sudhodhana and mother's name was Mahamaya. Sudhodhana was an aristocratic Hindu chieftain who made all effort to keep his son in all comfort. It is said that at Siddhartha's birth some astrologers had predicted that this child would either become a very great emperor and rule the world or renounce everything and bring emancipation to the world.

Till the early twenties of his life, Siddhartha lived all the time in the palace not venturing far from the comforts, luxuries, and delights provided to him by his father. There were three palaces, each of which were built to suit the three seasons of summer, rainy, and winter. Siddhartha resorted to each of them as convenient. Female minstrels were appointed to entertain him and he enjoyed all comforts and pleasures of life. He was also trained, during this period, in all the skills that a prince needed. His skill in archery helped him to win him his beautiful wife Yasodhara, while he was only sixteen years old. For the next thirteen years after his marriage, Siddhartha lived a very luxurious and

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complacent life until, one day, he encountered a very shocking scene, which was followed by three others.

It came to pass that, one day, the prince climbed his chariot and drove through the streets of his city. Suddenly, an old man with gray hair staggered out of his house clad in ragged clothing. On inquiry, he was horrorstruck by the fact that all men must encounter this inevitable pain of aging. On another day as the prince drove in his chariot, he heard a curdling cry for help. Turning to where the sound came from, Siddhartha was shocked to see a sick man rolling on the ground with excruciating pain and agony. On another occasion, the prince came face to face with a corpse of a man being carried to its funeral by bewailing men and women. Siddhartha was overpowered by the reality of the scope of human suffering. He was dumbfounded, shocked, disillusioned, and dismayed. Then, he saw a hermit, calm and dignified, clothed in flowing orange-colored robes. Siddhartha understood this to be the way to finding emancipation from suffering for all humans.

And so, one night, at the age of twenty-nine, the very day his son Rahul was born, Siddhartha left his family in the sleeping night hours and departed into the forest in search of truth, peace, and deliverance. Deep in the forest, he shaved his head and put on the yellow robes of a hermit. For six years, after that, he kept searching for truth. He went through severe forms of asceticism

to the extent that he was close to death. According to traditional accounts, once Gautama fasted so much that his belly was glued to his backbone. After having found this way to be fruitless, he renounced asceticism; then arriving at Gaya, sat down under a Peepal-tree with a resolve not to get up until he found a solution. The story goes on that Mara, the tempter, tried to dissuade Gautama from his meditation by sending horrifying storms, rains, and fiery weapons. But Gautama was adamant and firm. Then, after forty-nine days of meditation, on a full-moon night of May, Siddhartha achieved enlightenment. Henceforth, he would be known as "the Buddha," which means "the Enlightened One." The tree, under which he sat and achieved enlightenment, came to be known as Bodhi-tree or Bo-tree, and the spot came to be known as Buddhagaya (it is in modern Bihar). This was the thirty-fifth year of his life.

Beginning right here, for the next forty-five years of his life the Buddha toured through north India teaching and preaching his message of truth and deliverance. He made many convert, despite the many opposition and pains he had to face. After all this, finally, on a full moon day at Kusinara the Buddha passed away at the age of eighty.

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### The Teachings of Buddha

Immediately after his enlightenment, the Buddha set out for Banares. At Sarnath, he preached to his five ascetic friends his first sermon called the '*Dharmachakra Pravartana*,' i.e., the setting in motion of the wheel of *dharma*. The sermon set forth the four Noble Truths concerning life and the Eight-fold path to deliverance. *Dhamma* is paramount for Buddhists. That is the word by which they designate their religion. It means 'doctrine,' 'law,' 'norm,' 'religion,' 'truth,' or 'world order.'<sup>28</sup> '*Dharmachakra Pravartana*' is generally called the speech of the foundation of the Kingdom of Righteousness and is considered the foundation of the whole doctrine. *Buddha's* doctrine is based upon two axioms:

1. All life is sorrow,
2. Always keep the path of the mean.<sup>29</sup>

These two axioms are summed up in the Four Noble truths, which may be called the Gospel of Buddhism. The first two of these Truths diagnoses the problem, the third one declares the remedy, and the fourth one declares how this remedy is to be attained.

## 1. The Four Noble Truths

a. *The first Noble Truth is that suffering is a universal fact.*<sup>30</sup> All of earthly existence can be summed up in one word: suffering. The word for suffering in the Pali language (the language which the Buddha spoke) is *dukkha*. This word has a deep philosophical meaning and is very difficult to define. It covers the whole avenue of concepts related to suffering such as, misery, distress, despair, agony, suffering of body and mind, change, emptiness, imperfection, conflict.<sup>31</sup> This *dukkha* is what describes the condition of all existence.

"This is the noble Truth of pain: birth is suffering, old age is suffering, disease is suffering; death is suffering; sorrows, lamentation, dejection and despair are suffering. Contact with unpleasant thing is suffering; not getting what one craves is suffering. In brief the five groups of clinging are suffering."<sup>32</sup>

This, however, was not a pessimistic analysis leading to existential despair and nihilism. Life is not totally meaningless and hopeless. The Buddha was Buddha he knew the solution to this problem; he had awakened; he was enlightened. He has already diagnosed the

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sickness of the world. Now he goes on to explicate the second Noble Truth related to the cause of this problem of suffering.

2. *The second Noble Truth states that suffering results from desire.* Desire is the cause of all suffering. In this sense, suffering is purely subjectivised. The problem is internal not external. It is the thirst, the desire, the craving (*Tanha*) for sensual enjoyment, indulgence, and self-satisfaction that leads to renewed rebirths. The false self being submerged in desire, desire seeks satisfaction and falls down to another birth. And so the cycle is set in motion. The illusion of self is the fruit of ignorance, which gives birth to desire, which in turn causes sorrow.

3. *The third Noble Truth deals with the cessation of suffering.* Suffering ceases to be when desiring ceases to be. This state of complete deliverance, of unceasing and unspeakable bliss is called *nirvana*.

4. *The fourth Noble Truth declares the path to nirvana.* It is called the *Noble Eight-fold Path*. Also referred to as the Middle Way between the extremes of self-indulgence and self-torture,<sup>33</sup> the *Noble Eight-fold Path* lays down the moral principles of Right living:

- a. Right Views – understanding the Four Truths.
- b. Right Aspirations – good will, lustlessness, kindness, etc.

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- c. Right Speech – abstaining from lying, slander, vain talk, and harsh language.
- d. Right Conduct – abstaining from killing, stealing, and sexual immorality.
- e. Right Livelihood – earning in way that doesn't harm to any living being.
- f. Right Effort – rejecting evil thoughts and cultivating good thoughts.
- g. Right Mindfulness – watchfulness and vigilance to every state of body, feeling, and mind.
- h. Right Concentration – deep meditation to control the mind and body.

The Eight-fold path leads to insight and wisdom, which dispel ignorance and bring about serenity, knowledge, and enlightenment; which is *nirvana*.

**2. The Doctrine of Anatta**

Buddha revolted against the Vedas by proclaiming the doctrine of *anatta*, which essentially states that there is nothing called an eternal, unchanging soul, a

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fundamental diversion from Hinduism. This would even mean that the concept of an eternal *Paramatma*, the Supreme Self, the *Brahman*, is not only preposterous but also false. Every existing entity is subject to the law of change and decay. The apparent self (*atman*) is only an illusion, originating from and manifesting itself in a clinging to things.<sup>34</sup> The "I" arises out of sense-experience which also are the cause of suffering; since they add fresh fuel to the flame of life. An individual is made up of the *Skandhas*, which by combination produce the delusion of the self, the "I." The five *Skandhas* are:

- a. Material attributes (*Rupa*),
- b. Feeling (*Vedha*),
- c. Perception (*Samjana*),
- d. Mental dispositions and will (*Samskaras*),
- e. Reason (*Vijnana*).

All of the above forces or factors are changing; therefore, the self that they combine to produce is also changing, although it assumes that it is an unchanging unity<sup>35</sup>. The false idea of the self must be done away with to attain *nirvana*.



### 3. Karma and Rebirth

Buddhism retained the Hindu doctrine of Karma and Samsara, although with some modifications: Buddhism doesn't talk about the transmigration of soul. As we have already seen, it denies the existence of the self. According to Buddhism, after death the desire that a being entertained in his life (instead of destroying it) gathers fresh life and forms a new mind-body complex, a new 'being.' As long as there is desire, the law of Karma will hold sway and rebirth will occur.

One's Karma (action) determines one's kind of rebirth, as an animal, a ghost, or a god. By 'one's rebirth' is meant neither the rebirth of the same individual nor the rebirth of another. The Buddhists attempt to solve this paradox by the means of parables used to illustrate the doctrine. They say that rebirth is like lighting a new candle by an old one. The two lights have the same properties but are not identical.

### 4. Nirvana

The goal of Buddhism is not eternal life. It is extinction and annihilation of the illusion of the self and freedom from the cycle of rebirth, the end of all birth and individual existence. It is freedom from suffering. The word *nirvana* literally means 'dying out,' or 'extinction' as of fire. The world is enveloped with the fire of

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suffering kindled by desire. All the panorama of suffering that we observe is only a depiction of how evil desire is. This desire needs to be extinguished. The extinguishing of this desire is *nirvana*. Once desire for existence is annihilated, individual existence is annihilated, and with that all suffering.

The way to *nirvana* is the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths, and the pursuit of the Noble Eight-fold Path. Sadly, Buddhists can hardly point to at least one who has experienced *nirvana*, in the present time.

## Main Buddhist Groups and their Ways of Worship

The four main groups within Buddhism are: Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, and Mantrayana Buddhism.

*1. Theravada Buddhism.* This form of Buddhism is the orthodox group that rigorously sticks to the Buddha's original teachings. It follows the doctrine of *anatta*, rebirth, the Four Noble Truths, and the Eight-fold Path strictly. Buddha is considered as the emancipated one and his refuge is sought. This form of Buddhism is also called Hinayana (Lesser Vehicle) Buddhism because of its straitness and conservativeness.

Theravada Buddhism is practiced in Sri Lanka and Thailand where it has also been mixed with local beliefs and practices.

2. *Mahayana Buddhism*. the high demands of Buddhist ethics were very severe for ordinary men and women. Two hundred years after Buddha, a group of his disciples came up with a more liberal interpretation of Buddha's teachings that would suit the needs of ordinary people. This movement came to be known as Mahayana Buddhism or the 'Greater Vehicle.' This form of Buddhism is practiced in the northern countries of Asia, China, Korea, and Japan.

While the Hinayanas stressed salvation by works, Mahayanis taught that faith and devotion were sufficient for salvation. *Nirvana* was not the only goal. One could aim to become a Bodhisattva, a compassionate person who vows to reach supreme illumination in order to help all other humans to gain the same. The Bodhisattva postpones entering *nirvana* for the same. The Mahayanis consider the Buddha to be their savior. There are other Buddhas besides Gautama that the Mahayanis venerate. In Japan, Vairocana is the great Buddha; in China, Amitabha. The Mahayanis also worship a goddess known as Kuan Yin, who is given equal status with Amitabha and worshipped as the goddess of mercy, love, and compassion.

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3. *Mantraya Buddhism*. This form of Buddhism is prevalent in Tibet, Mongolia, and Japan. A mixture of magic, mysticism, and occultism, it was brought to Tibet by an Indian Buddhist monk named Padma Sambhava in about AD 750. Also known as Tantrism, it includes prayers, ritual dances, demon exorcism, and magic spells.

4. *Zen Buddhism*. Zen Buddhism derives its name from the Japanese '*Zen*' meaning 'contemplation.' It originated in China and from there spread to Japan. The west knows Zen Buddhism better than any other form of Buddhism.

According to the Zen doctrine, enlightenment can be obtained through contemplation. It is not study, neither is it reason that leads to enlightenment; only a mystical intuitive insight does. This form of Buddhism understands logic and the mind as being a hindrance to enlightenment. The art of right meditating is to be learnt by meditating and transcending the mind.

## Ways of Worship

As has already been seen both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhists resort to Buddha for help in attaining salvation. In Theravada countries, the Buddha is regarded as *Devatideva* – the God above gods – who

lives, knows, and loves, and is worthy of all adoration. Strict orthodox Buddhists, however, regard Buddha as only the greatest man and the most enlightened teacher who ever lived.

*1. The Refuges and the Precept.* Buddhist worship begins with a recital of the formula of homage to the Buddha which is followed by the recital of the worshipper's resort to the three Refuges, viz., the Buddha, the Doctrine, and the brotherhood of monks.

Immediately after this the five Precepts are taken, which are:

- a. To abstain from destroying life,
- b. To abstain from taking things not given,
- c. To abstain from sexual misconduct,
- d. To abstain from false speech,
- e. To abstain from intoxicating drinks.

*2. Offerings.* Offerings offered by the worshippers are of various kinds, such as flowers, oil lamps, candles, incense, food, drinks, and requisites for the monks. Each offering is accompanied by a recital of the relative formula.

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3. *Prayers and Invocations.* Prayers and invocations are offered for human needs and material blessings, for rain, food, and for pardon.

4. *Transference of Merit.* Worshippers offer offerings in the name of their deceased relatives in the form of robes, utensils, medicines, and food for monks. The purpose is to transfer the merit thus gained to the account of the dead. A formula invoking happiness for and transference of merit to the dead relative follow this.

5. *Pilgrimages.* The Buddhists consider a pilgrimage to a sacred place very meritorious. The birthplace of Buddha, the place of his enlightenment, the place of his first sermon, and the place where he passed into *nirvana* are considered sacred. In addition to these places are the Sri Pada in Sri Lanka and Phrabad in Thailand. It is considered very meritorious to journey to these sacred places all the way on foot.

6. *Ceremonies and Festivals.* The chief ceremony is known as *Pirit*. It is believed that this ceremony wards off the malice of demons and gives blessing.

In this ceremony, one end of a long thread, twisted around the neck of a new clay pot filled with water, is held by the Buddhist monks while the other end is held by the congregation. The monks chant selected texts from the Buddhist scriptures called *Parittas*. After this, the thread is broken in pieces and tied round the wrist

and neck of those assembled. The sanctified water is sprinkled on all to ward off evil and bring blessings.

Another festival, the festival of *Vesak*, is celebrated by Buddhists all over the world. It falls on the full moon day of the month of May. This day has three significances. It is said that it is the day of the Buddha's birth, his enlightenment, and his death. The Buddhists decorate and illuminate their houses, streets, and temples on this day. Clad in white, the devotees perform religious rites at the *Stupa*, the Bodhi-tree, and the Buddha image. They also assemble in the temples and halls to observe precepts, meditate, and listen to religious discourse.

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June 10, 2004

### End Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> A Lion Handbook, *The World's Religions*, (Oxford, 1992), pp. 28-32

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.22

<sup>7</sup> David A. Brown, *A Guide to Religions*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), p. 79

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68

<sup>9</sup> Not exact quotation. *Court Marshall*, SAB TV, 23<sup>rd</sup> January, 03; 10:30 PM

<sup>10</sup> David A. Brown, *A Guide to Religions*, p. 68

<sup>11</sup> *Glimpses of World Religions*, (Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House, 1957), p. 39

<sup>12</sup> David A. Brown, *A Guide to Religions*, p. 31

<sup>13</sup> *Glimpses of World Religions*, p. 31

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36

<sup>17</sup> David A. Brown, *A Guide to Religions*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), p. 182

<sup>18</sup> Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, Trs., *The Meaning of The Glorious Koran*, Surah V: 3, (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 1996), p.96

<sup>19</sup> David A. Brown, *A Guide to Religions*, p.207

<sup>20</sup> David A. Brown, *A Guide to Religions*, p.208

<sup>21</sup> Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, Trs., *The Meaning of The Glorious Koran*, Surah XXXV: 11, p. 312

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, Surah II. 213, p.52

<sup>24</sup> David A. Brown, *A Guide to Religions*, p.211

<sup>25</sup> Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, Trs., *The Meaning of The Glorious Koran*, Surah II: 183-185, p.49

<sup>26</sup> K.V. Paul Pillai, *India's Search for the Unknown Christ*, IV ed. (New Delhi: CLC, 1990)pp. 86,87

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.87

<sup>28</sup> *Glimpses of World Religions*, (Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House, 1957), p.52

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52,53

<sup>30</sup> David A. Brown, *A Guide to Religions*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), p. 127

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.127

<sup>32</sup> *Glimpses of World Religions*, p.53

<sup>33</sup> David A. Brown, *A Guide to Religions*, p.128

<sup>34</sup> *Glimpses of World Religions*, p.57

<sup>35</sup> "It" is used here functionally and relatively for the sake of explanation. By positing the self as an illusion, the one who is having the illusion is ruled out.